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THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY IN READING

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Children in modern American public schools learn to read in half the time that their grandparents or parents required for the same degree of proficiency. Many parents do not believe this. Nevertheless, they are mistaken.

This rapid progress in reading is confined approximately to the first three or four years of the child's schooling. When this same child reaches the grammar- and high-school grades, instead of being a good reader for his age he has become a lamentably poor one. In both his oral and written English he is a sore trial to his teachers. His understanding of his texts is often superficial and inaccurate. His taste for reading matter is generally poor, if not unwholesome. And the study of English in its every phase is to him the biggest bore in the curriculum.

Furthermore, the early success of this child included far more than mere facility at reading. Did he not talk almost as correctly in the third grade as he does in the eighth? Although he wrote very simple English, yet did it not measurably approach in style and caliber the language he was able to read? Very few grownups have a corresponding mastery of English. He understood what he read in his texts. There was little difference between what he voluntarily read out of school and what he was required to read in school. Such a pedagogical triumph and satisfaction does not occur again in the whole period of his education. But the most important thing of all, he thoroughly enjoyed all phases of the work.

It inevitably follows from such a condition that there is something basically wrong with the methods of teaching English in the later grades. Whether the methods used in these two contrasted periods are substantially the same or substantially different, they cannot be equally well adapted to the pupils for they bring entirely different results.

Now the writer is only an ordinary obscure school teacher and not an expert in pedagogics. Let this confession be remembered as an extenuating circumstance for any and all dogmatic statements which may appear in this effusion. He has taught for twenty years, in all grades and in five different states. To his own have been added a thousand formal and informal laments of fellow teachers. He has read not a little of what educators and psychologists have written on the subject. He has looked at the problem from many angles and thought deeply for a solution. In the last few years an idea, how original and important he does not know, has been forced upon him. He thinks he has found the reason for this failure in English teaching.

It is the pupil's sorriily meager and inadequate vocabulary. He will never be a success in English until he knows more words—not to use them necessarily, but to know them. I know this sounds cold and unspiritual. I know this suggests a reversal of the progress we have made in putting a new spirit in the place of the letter of the old education. But read on, and we shall see.

Our mother tongue is wonderful and sublime, either to write or to understand. One's mastery of it is determined by the development of the finer senses and tastes. On the other hand, this mastery cannot proceed without the mastery of certain elements that lie very close to the ground.

From a few investigations I have made, I am thoroughly convinced that the vocabulary of the vast majority of grammar- and high-school pupils is about three grades behind what it should be for a proper understanding of what they are required to read.

It may seem absurd to argue that a few strange words scattered through a lesson of several pages could work such havoc. But every sentence obscured by an unknown word is passed over lightly by the pupil in the hope that he will catch the thread of thought in the next. Experience tells him that even several such hazy sentences will not prevent him from meeting his teacher's idea of a good recitation. Idioms, allusions, unusual constructions, and involved sentences are soon treated in the same manner.

A most pernicious mental habit is thus engendered. The pupil becomes content with a partial and hazy understanding of what he is reading. The unknown soon fails to pique his intellectual curiosity. A strange word is merely a "big word," one of the

inevitable nuisances continually met with in his reading. Vagueness of word and sentence he accepts as a matter of course. His reading soon becomes a matter of turning pages instead of following a line of thought.

But the most surprising and fatal thing is not that he doesn't know what he is reading but that he doesn't know that he doesn't know. He is the sorry victim of his own unconscious mental state. He has abused his mental acumen until it refuses to function. Half-meanings make the same impression of finality as should come only from whole meanings.

I do not believe that this condition is generally known and appreciated by teachers. To be acquainted with one's pupils, to hear them recite, to have a fairly accurate estimate of their intelligence, is not necessarily to know how poorly they grasp the thought of a page, much less to know the wrong mental processes responsible for the failure.

The "dictionary habit" is certain to occur to some as the only cure for a poor vocabulary. Frankly, to my way of thinking, the "dictionary habit" is one of the greatest fetishes in educational practice of the day.

A little examination of this habit will make its absurdity apparent. There are in the daily lessons of the average pupil from five to twenty words of which he has but little or no conception. No matter how rigidly his teacher holds him to the habit, these new words never get any more than the once-over attention. Only the pupil with a phenomenal memory will thus retain them beyond the immediate recitation.

Furthermore, this habit involves a prodigious waste of time. In the course of a year he is bound to consult the dictionary many times for the same word. Also, the definitions in the average school dictionary are as difficult for the pupil to grasp as the words they define. This sets the pupil on a wild-goose chase for the definition of a definition, twice and thrice removed. After the loss of much time in thumbing leaves he not infrequently fetches up with the identical word he sought in the first place.

No pupil will ever acquire the habit of depending upon such an inefficient practice. Unless the pupil obtains the information sought without further ado, consulting the dictionary will never be more than a school task required by the teacher. Definitions

should be so simple that the pupil cannot fail to understand. The editors of these same dictionaries may be good lexicographers but they are poor educators. One such editor makes almost a humorous exposé of his ignorance of the real requirements by alleging, in support of the simplicity of his dictionary, that every word that occurs in a definition can always be found in the vocabulary of the dictionary!

If a meager vocabulary and the lack of efficient methods for increasing it be the cause of this English failure, why did the pupil make such progress in the first four years when no attention was given to his vocabulary? The reason is evident. He already possessed no mean vocabulary. He had but to learn their written symbols. The child's reading in those first years was a mere matter of catching up with his oral command of the language.

Progress beyond this stage is conditioned by his learning really new elements. He must not only acquire new words for old ideas but also acquire new words for entirely new ideas. Yet our educational system makes not the slightest recognition of the fact that such a mental task is double and treble that of the first years. It leads the pupil into the unknown reaches of the language as if it were still but a mere matter of recognizing the graphic symbol of a known word. And given a knowledge of phonics, that is hardly a task at all.

If every child was reared in an atmosphere of high culture and education, this feature of the problem might almost disappear. One must remember also that though the majority of American homes represent a fair degree of education, yet the oral language of those homes is very close to the ground. The English of books and literature is almost a different tongue and, outside of school, there are few opportunities of coming in contact with it.

One might think that after several decades of free public schools the language of the people would be greatly improved. But the American schools are the melting pot of the whole world. Peoples of inferior education have immigrated here to such an extent, and compulsory education laws have been so generally enforced, that it is very probable that the command of language, possessed by the average school children of today, owing to home influences, is lower than that of the school children of a few decades ago. But whether this be so or not, our system certainly does not recognize the facts

that would tend to make it so. Even the contrary is assumed. Witness the manner in which literary classics have been pushed downward in the courses of study. Shakespeare was once read but little below the colleges. He is now read even in the grades, as reading goes.

Must we then set our grammar- and high-school pupils to conning and cramming five to twenty words daily into their vocabulary? I believe thoroughly in the modern spirit of education and would have none of the letter that kills.

But the spirit does not always give life; neither does the letter always kill. One example will suffice. Every teacher knows that a modern child learns to read sooner than his grandmother because of the phonic method. But by itself considered could there be anything more of the letter than keeping a child for weeks upon the task of learning the forty odd sounds which the letters represent? These sounds are absolutely meaningless when isolated. Yet it is certain that this is the more efficient way of attacking a language. And the crowning glory of primary teaching is the countless pedagogical devices by which the child acquires this lifeless and dissected knowledge and still has a far more absorbing time of it than his grandmother who was thrown almost immediately into the full tide of the spirit of literature.

In this successful primary teaching there are several facts that can have an important bearing on determining what methods should prevail for the later years. If pedagogy can build upon such elemental things as the sounds of letters, its wonderful drill methods of teaching them, surely the meaning of words contain equal possibilities. Furthermore, rapid progress is made because this elemental knowledge and principles are first thoroughly fixed in the mind of the child. For it must be insisted that it is not a case of giving him something different from what was given his grandmother. The phonic method is not an innovation. Neither grandmother nor anyone else ever learned to read English without it. Grandmother progressed slowly until she had unconsciously mastered the phonics, until the mere "spelling out" of a word would give a clue to its pronunciation. But the modern method is more efficient because it does not leave the acquisition of this phonic knowledge to chance.

And yet, again, much drill is necessary, for the knowledge of the sounds of letters must depend upon sheer memory. There is no logical connection between the sound of "t" and its shape except some fanciful idea the teacher may invent to assist the memory of the child. Neither is there any logical connection between "turgid" or any other word and its meaning. Both are purely arbitrary relations and must be memorized. And any method which leaves the acquisition of words and their meaning to a kind of soaking-in process is as wasteful and cumbersome as the method by which grandmother was taught to read.

Of course there is no necessity of imposing on the pupil the Herculean task of learning five to twenty new words a day. He meets that many new words daily because the proper attention has not been given to the growth of his vocabulary. From the few investigations I have made I believe that if the pupil, from his fourth year on, had acquired even one basic word a day, he would enter the high school with a vocabulary that is not equalled by even the exceptional high-school graduate of the present. Disregarding those words which come to him outside of school, I do not believe that he acquires under present methods even one basic word a week.

It might be urged against the idea of word-drill that the pupil learns by doing, that he learns to read by reading. But a moment's thought will convince one that no amount of word-drill could deprive the pupil of the opportunity for such a highly essential psychological process. Furthermore, it is never good pedagogy to leave the acquisition of elements and fundamentals to chance and gradual absorption.

And the acquisition of an oral vocabulary without drill on words is not a parallel case. Reading is not the same as life. In oral contact with a language there are countless concrete checks and guides to assist the understanding which are entirely absent from the printed page.

I know it is possible for a grown man or woman to acquire an extensive knowledge of English by merely the proper kind of reading. Given a rudimentary knowledge one can thus acquire a foreign language. But the mature mind has a broader mental experience. It is much easier for such a mind to deduce the true meaning of a word from the context. But to the young mind,

with its limited range and experience, it is largely a pure guess. Often he has very few possible ideas from which he can even guess. Some of the new words are likely to represent ideas entirely unknown to his experience.

It seems to me that the only logical solution of the problem is the adoption of a prescribed vocabulary graduated to all grammar-and high-school grades. Each successive grade should contain new words corresponding to the pupil's mental development, and they should not exceed in number what he can thoroughly master and retain. Texts for any given grade should conform in language to the vocabulary of that grade. Definite provision should be made in all grammar- and high-school grades for the mastery of this vocabulary. As for the time required, it could be done in half the time that is now wasted on the "dictionary habit."

Such a plan could hardly be called an innovation in educational practice. A similar change was made a few years ago in the teaching of numbers. Number knowledge and number combinations and tables are now given to the pupil in such easy stages that they are mastered once and for all time.

I am not advocating any childish games to be used by pupils in acquiring a vocabulary. But surely there is a sufficient wealth of material in words—their various meanings, forms and uses, their etymologies, synonyms, antonyms, and distinctions—to make an appealing study to both grammar- and high-school pupils. It should be given in connection with spelling and would make a justifiable use of much of the time now wasted in spelling words never used or in parroting the unintelligible definitions of the dictionary.

Teachers who know how pupils "hate" English, especially dry word-study, will not see much of promise in this. But why does the pupil "hate" English?

He hates it because it is always in the way. He is forever compelled to study and wrestle with somebody's highbrow English. The wonderland of science, the great stories of history, and the appealing things of literature are obscured by a language poorly understood. Much of his attention is diverted to understanding the language and some of his time wasted in thumbing for notes. He gets very little respite from this sort of thing. The wonder is not that he hates English but that he doesn't hate every study that he approaches through the printed page.

I thoroughly believe that everything that a pupil is required to read should be so written as to require the least possible effort to be understood. Is not that the accepted standard among those who write for mature men and women? Why should the young mind be the innocent victim in the violation of all the laws in the economy of attention? Difficult language is not necessary to his mental growth. He grows by understanding, not by misunderstanding. If his reading matter is properly graduated to correspond to his mental growth, his mind will have abundant opportunity for healthful exercise.

The pupil's studies in literature need offer no obstacle to the system herein proposed. It would be almost impossible, it is true, to find the proper literary selections that conformed absolutely to the vocabulary of a given grade. But a very acceptable approximation could be made. It has often occurred to me that the makers of literary courses of study pay not the slightest attention to the vocabulary of the selection. The appropriateness of the theme for a given age seems to be the only determining factor.

But it was pointed out that very poor results are obtained in oral and written English. But whether much or little grammar is crammed into the heads of the pupils, the writing and speaking of correct English is largely a matter of imitation. It is difficult, however, for a pupil to imitate what he does not understand. If pupils thoroughly enjoyed and entered fully into the spirit of what they read the imitative impulse would be much more alert. Much of poor oral and written expression is due to a failure to think clearly. But circumstances have not permitted them to think clearly in following the thought of a printed page and it is only natural for them to carry this fault into what they write.

Now there is no denying the fact that the popular taste for reading matter among grownups as well as pupils is much below what is in school and college courses of study. Poor understanding, rather than poor taste, is the real reason. The writers of this cheaper literature take the measure of the popular understanding and write accordingly. If thought- and ideal-content alone determined what was read the popular taste would be quite as good as that of the highbrows. If Harold Bell Wright had the style of Henry James the sale of his books would, I fancy, be reduced to quite harmless proportions. And on the other hand, such a style

would also deprive Jack London of his deserved popularity. Pupils and the people read what they can understand.

I hold no brief for the classics. Much of the time given to them could be more profitably spent on modern literature. But at any rate it is useless to attempt to create an abiding taste for a literature that is not thoroughly and easily understood. The schools, however, notoriously fail to put over not only the classics but also much good modern literature as well. It is useless merely to bring these lofty literatures down and put them in the hands of the masses. What is needed is to elevate the understanding of the masses up to that kind of mental food. All literature, modern or classic, was written to be read and enjoyed rather than studied and then ignored. When our schools and colleges turn out graduates whose knowledge of the English language is equal in range to that of English literature, then no literary selections, modern or classic, will suffer any great and undue neglect.

The success of the changes I have suggested would require a thorough and efficient application of the principle. As intimated, the work of acquiring a vocabulary would be done in the spelling lesson. Every spelling lesson would of necessity be a page of exercises on a few words instead of a mere list of words. Any live educator ought to be able to make such exercises highly varied, attractive, and conducive to thought and the acquisition of a vocabulary. The common practice of calling for the use of a word in a sentence would need to be given a new birth. I would call them facts and require the use of the word in the statement of a generally known fact. The vast majority of sentences which the average teacher accepts are simply imaginative generalities which may or may not be based on an accurate conception of the word. But if these exercises required one word to be used in stating a geographical fact, another in stating a historical fact, the pupil would do some real thinking. The use of two given words in the same sentence could be required, or the use of all words in an imagined incident. I think anyone can see that there is no end to the variety of exercises that could be arranged. But they should not be left to the teacher but should be definitely stated in the spelling book for the pupil to work on in the preparation of his lesson.

A spelling book thus compiled would solve the problem of the number of words it should contain. The old spellers contained as many as ten thousand. Newer spellers, based on alleged investigations as to the number of words actually used by the average person, contain as few as three thousand. Neither one of these standards for compiling a speller is correct. The first gives the pupil an impossible task. The second ignores the fact that there are many good virile and expressive words which would make his language more effective. He doesn't use them because he doesn't properly know them. A speller should contain just as many words of good current usage as the average class can thoroughly master. And mastery should include both spelling and meaning. Constant drill should permanently fix these words in the pupil's vocabulary.

I have said that texts should be written to conform to an adopted vocabulary, but I am not so sure that many of them would have to be rewritten. I know that pupils do not properly understand the majority of texts, but I believe they ought to and I believe they would if the proper attention were given to the acquisition of a vocabulary.

I might add in conclusion that since writing the above criticism of school dictionaries I have examined and used *The Winston Simplified Dictionary*, published by John C. Winston, of Philadelphia. The editors, W. D. Lewis and E. A. Singer, deserve the hearty thanks of the entire teaching profession. They seem to understand what a dictionary should be and have given us the only dictionary I know of that can properly be called a school dictionary.